

Seven expert tips for healthy eating while you're staying home

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Being confined to your home during a pandemic can leave you feeling both stressed and bored, a combination that can mean overindulging in your isolation food supplies.

"You're in a constant state of not knowing what's going on, you're fearful, and that makes it tough to eat healthily," said University of Alberta nutrition expert Sabina Valentine.

Stress can increase our [cortisol levels](#), which causes our appetites to change, Valentine said, and that can cause us to overeat and develop cravings for sugary and [fatty foods](#).

Being stuck in our homes for long periods can also mean boredom—and combined with constant close proximity to the kitchen, that can lead to snacking, Valentine said.

"People are looking for comfort, they're looking for an escape, and unfortunately [food](#) can sometimes provide that."

However, this time can also provide us with an

opportunity to reflect on our lifestyle habits, Valentine said, and there are some strategies you can take to encourage [healthy eating habits](#).

Keep your options healthy

"Keeping those more gluttonous foods out of your cupboards means that when you do want a snack, you're choosing something healthy rather than unhealthy," Valentine said.

She suggests keeping fresh fruits and veggies on hand to snack on, or frozen if you're looking for things that won't spoil as quickly. And make healthy choices when you're at the store.

"Instead of potato chips, buy popcorn. That's a healthier option if you're looking to snack," she said.

Plan ahead

Social isolating means you should be going to grocery stores less often, which means you need to plan your meals, said Valentine. If you know ahead of time what you're going to be making, you can make a healthy shopping list. Planning ahead also means you're putting to use the items already in your kitchen.

"Before you go out to buy, take stock of what you already have. This is a good time to make use of meals you've previously made and frozen," said Valentine.

Stick to your list

"It's not just about healthy foods. A lot of Canadians are economically challenged at this time, so budgeting is important to consider when you're buying food," she said, adding that means really sticking to your shopping list and not digressing too much from it.

Involve the kids

"If you've got kids around, involve them in meal planning and preparation," said Valentine. "Even if they're little they can help stir things, and they can tell you what they like."

Be aware

It's important to recognize when you're making poor food choices.

"Recording what you're eating for one to four days can really increase your awareness of what you're doing, because you can look at it and go, "Oh my gosh, this is so different from how I usually eat,"" Valentine said.

From there, it's about recognizing why you're eating what you're eating.

"If you're bored, make a list of 10 activities you can do besides eating. If you're stressed, talk to someone about it. We are all connected by coronavirus, so it can help to talk to family members or friends about how we're feeling," she said.

Eating for immunity

There are no magic bullets to healthy eating, said Valentine.

When it comes to boosting immunity during the COVID-19 crisis, people should be skeptical of anything that's promising a quick fix or people trying to sell something, Valentine said. They need to look at information that's reliable and accurate.

"You want a diet that's filled with adequate amounts of protein, fibre, vitamins and minerals. If you have those in your diet, you shouldn't need any of the supplements that are being marketed around the coronavirus," she said.

Valentine recommends following Canada's Food Guide, ensuring you are filling half your plate with vegetables and fruits; a quarter with protein-rich foods like meat, nuts, beans and dairy; and a quarter with whole grains like brown rice or whole

wheat pasta.

Vegetables and fruits are important for [immune function](#) because they provide a lot of vitamins A and C. Valentine suggests choosing a colourful array if you're able to: carrots, peppers, oranges, leafy greens, berries or apples. She also recommends all Canadians take at least a 400 International Unit vitamin D supplement.

"Vitamin D deficiency is linked to increased susceptibility to infection. We live in a northern latitude, so even though we're getting out, we're still not exposing our skin to sunlight, and we don't have a lot of foods in our diet that have a lot of vitamin D in them," Valentine said.

"That's basically what a healthy diet looks like—which really isn't any different from a healthy diet we should be eating normally."

Eating with COVID-19

What about if you're diagnosed with or suspect you have COVID-19?

"For the majority of us, it's similar to having a bad cold, so ensure you're getting enough fluids and healthy foods. The same principles we apply to a normal healthy diet should be applied if someone has COVID-19," said Valentine.

Often a loss of appetite can accompany symptoms, she noted, so in those cases meal replacement drinks like Boost or Ensure can help as if you don't feel like eating.

"The [immune system](#) relies on protein to work, and our immune cells require energy. It's like the fuel for our cars. So if you don't have enough calories or protein coming in, your immune system is not going to work very well and you're not going to be able to fight the virus as well."

Valentine pointed out that while vitamin C and zinc in lozenge form have been linked to immune function and can each work to decrease the duration of a cold, people should always be careful when using supplements or any natural health products.

"Ultimately, if you're eating a healthy diet you shouldn't need any of those supplements."

Provided by University of Alberta

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